

Chaos at the Europoort: Performance, Empathy and Materiality in *Euro Truck Simulator 2*

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Introduction

This paper discusses the conditions of possibility for relating to, understanding, and appreciating “gameplay performances”, that is, computer games as played by other people, through an existential-ludological and phenomenological analysis of ‘mundane vehicle simulators’, in particular *Euro Truck Simulator 2* (2012, later *ETS2*) with *TruckersMP* multiplayer mod (2014). It appears that as facing the player with a distinctive existential condition characteristic to computer games, but lacking many of the other characteristics commonly associated with computer games, mundane vehicle simulator like *ETS2* provides a ‘test case’, which allows ‘isolating’ the effects its distinctive existential condition has to the nature of technology-enabled performance, thus opening new avenues of enquiry in the relatively untheorised area of gameplay as performance (Fernandez-Vara 2008; Owen 2017; Causey 2003; Dixon 2007);

Building on the performance studies scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte’s (2008) idea of bodily co-presence as the precondition for performance, this paper argues that in order to relate to, understand, and appreciate gameplay performances, empathy based on human condition must be supplemented with empathy that builds on an understanding of the existential condition against which players can realize themselves and which thus lends significance to events, objects, and encounters in the game by structuring them into an “instrumental-rational ontology” (Leino 2015). This condition, which I have previously referred to as ‘gameplay condition’ (Leino 2009), is hard-coded in the technological materiality of the game artifacts, and thus persists across players and playings. The player-performer is co-constituted from human and technology, and their motility involves skills and modalities not available to ‘plain’ humans, and their existence as player-performer depends on their ability to cope with the resistance the game artifact imposes on their project of playing-performing.

Consequently, the audience’s empathy toward the player-performer relies on the audience being able to “technomorphise” themselves: to imagine themselves in the shoes of the precarious human-technology hybrid that is the player-performer. On the one hand, without empathy based on the “gameplay condition” to complement the empathy based on human condition, the gameplay performance falls back on being a “technologically mediated performance” or a “performance in a virtual environment.” On the other hand, if the audience is unable to experience an agent in the gameplay performance as the player-performer, the gameplay performance loses its characteristic as a performance in the first place: the audience must anthropomorphise what they observe, to find the human in the performance. For the player to be able to relate to the gameplay performance, both of these

two modes of empathy have to coexist simultaneously: the audience needs to anthropomorphise the player-performer and technomorphise themselves. This duality appears to resemble what Latour (1998, 225-6) refers to as (x)-morphism.

The structure of this paper is as follows. I will first introduce Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of bodily co-presence as a pre-condition for performance, and highlight its existential underpinnings through discussing corporeal performances and performances in virtual reality. I will then introduce the genre of mundane vehicle simulators and justify it as a relevant test case for talking about gameplay performance. I will then discuss how empathy toward the player-performer in gameplay performances is possible, and illustrate this with a range of examples from technologically enabled performances. I will conclude by reflecting back on the initial example of being caught in the jumble of trucks in *ETS2MP*, discussing the implications of the analysis to the discourse on virtual performances, and, by acknowledging the limitations of the analysis in this paper.

Chaos at the Europoort

The YouTube video “Chaos at the Europoort” by ukgam3r¹ portrays a parking lot in a state of disarray with a jumble of colourful semi-trucks, with their trailers loaded with containers, tanks, heavy machinery, and other cargoes. Some trucks are still mobile and on their wheels, while many are toppled over. It sounds like most of the trucks are honking their horns. The driver shooting the video appears to be caught in the middle of the pile with their own truck and trying to find a way out. The video has not been shot in the Port of Rotterdam, but in the computer game *Euro Truck Simulator 2* with the *TruckersMP* multiplayer mod (Later *ETS2MP*). It is one among many videos on YouTube documenting events and situations in *ETS2MP*, some more attention-worthy, humorous, or exceptional than others, ranging from getting stuck in traffic jams and being involved in spectacular crashes and close-call situations to parallel-parking a truck or simply driving on an empty highway at night. These videos are discussed on popular online forums such as Reddit² apparently by players and non-players alike. *ETS2MP* is also a popular game among streamers, who broadcast their adventures on Twitch.TV, supposedly also to a mixed audience of players and non-players.

Some of the non-players, such as those on Reddit³, seem to have hard time trying to relate to events in *ETS2MP*, highlighting for example the absurdity of getting stuck in a traffic jam in a computer game. The puzzlement of external observers at events in *ETS2MP* seems reasonable, especially if we compare *ETS2MP* to other examples of online games gathering large audiences, such as eSports. *ETS2MP* provides little in the way of ‘scaffolding’ to assist viewers: there is no score, or any evident ‘goal’ against which players’ actions could be evaluated. Neither is anything ‘at stake’ in *ETS2MP*: there will be no winners or losers at the end of an *ETS2MP* session, and, should the players find themselves in too deep trouble, they can abort whatever mission they are on, edit their savegame file to make up any financial losses accrued from aborted mission, and take a new job. Thus, unlike, say, *League of Legends* (X), *ETS2MP* does not invite itself to be appreciated as a *game*, a *competition*. It appears that watching *ETS2MP* played by other people, is indeed a rather peculiar

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yXekY_zNuY

² <https://www.reddit.com/r/trucksim/>

³ https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/376z45/you_got_stuck_in_a_traffic_jam_for_10_minutes_on/

phenomenon – perhaps comparable to for example the “mukbang” eating videos popular in South Korea.

To understand and relate to the in-game events in *ETS2MP*, such as those depicted in the “Chaos at the Europort” video, we might begin with the video description, which reads: “This is what happens when you disable the no collisions zone at the Europort”. This description, however, does not get us very far, unless we are aware of not only what a “no collisions zone” is, but also what it means, or perhaps more accurately, *what is it like* to collide in *ETS2MP*. This anecdote prompts the question to be asked in this paper: what are the conditions by which we can understand, relate to, and appreciate the events in *ETS2MP* as played by other people, vis á vis relating to events in, say, on-stage dance performances. This question suggests a framing on gameplay as *performance*. This framing, in turn, invites us to consider gameplay performances in relation to other technologically facilitated performances, illustrate the similarities and differences between them, and establish the unique aspects of gameplay performances.

Performance and human condition

Fischer-Lichte’s seminal book on the aesthetics of performance opens with an account of Abramovic’s performance *Thomas Lips*, detailing the items the performer consumes and the actions she undertakes. Fischer-Lichte (2008, 16) goes on to suggest that *Thomas Lips* “eludes the scope of traditional aesthetic theories” and “vehemently resists the demands of hermeneutic aesthetics.” Fischer-Lichte is not suggesting that Abramovic’s performance was devoid of things to interpret: “the objects used and the actions carried out on and with them could indeed be construed as signs”, she writes (*ibid.*). Neither does she exclude the possibility that the performance, as a whole, could be interpreted as signifying something outside itself, such as “an exploration of violence” or a “criticism of social conditions”. However, she suggests that such readings “remain incommensurable with the event of the performance”, and that the “audience would have attempted such interpretations only to a limited degree during the performance itself”. Rather, the performer’s actions “constituted a new, singular reality for the artist and the audience, that is to say, for all participants of the performance”, which was “not merely interpreted by the audience but first and foremost experienced” (*ibid.*, 16-17).

Thus, Fischer-Lichte draws our attention to materiality of the performance (which “preceded all attempts to interpret them beyond their self-referentiality” [*ibid.*, 18]) instead of its semioticity, and compels us to invoke the faculties of empathy rather than the faculties of rational understanding, as she (*ibid.*, 16) argues that “understanding the artist’s actions was less important than the experiences that she had while carrying them out and that were generated in the audience.” Fischer-Lichte (*ibid.*, 11-12) reminds us that while watching Abramovic harming herself on stage, “the audience had to infer a strong physical pain from the heavy external injuries that she inflicted on herself”, and uses this example to argue that “bodily co-presence of actors and spectators” constitutes the “specific mediality” of performance (*ibid.*, 39). Based on the requirement for bodily co-presence, Fischer-Lichte (*ibid.*, 38) provides what could be construed as a definition of performance, as follows:

“Performance, then, requires two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, to gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime.

Their encounter – interactive and confrontational – produces the event of the performance.”

It is worthwhile to look beyond the “bodily co-presence” to account for the mediality of the performance. As we do so, we note that there is a pre-condition for bodily co-presence. Merely there being bodies in the room does not guarantee that a baseline for relating to a performance can be described. The bodies apparently have to be, somehow, alike: the pre-condition for Fischer-Lichte’s “bodily co-presence” is the embodied human condition shared by the bodies in the room. Describing the experience of observing a performance, she refers to events posing a physical danger to the performer (such as a tightrope dancer falling, or, a tiger attacking its tamer), as the moments “the audience fears most and which it yet feverishly awaits.” (ibid., 14) Thus, it seems that Fischer-Lichte’s requirement of bodily co-presence has an existential dimension which could be made explicit, and which seems to be of greater significance than the question of whether the bodies are in the same room: without knowing what it feels like and means to be a human (falling off a tightrope, or being attacked by a tiger), we would not be able to relate to a performance by a human being, regardless of whether or not we are in the same space with the performer.

This appears to apply not only for observing stage performances, but also for observing traditional games being played: can we relate to and appreciate the ice hockey player’s physical strength and skill involved in passing the puck to their teammate, like we can relate to the performance of a dancer on stage, as both are human beings. The appreciation begins in empathy, imagining ourselves in their shoes. This mechanism which we can describe in corporeal performances seems to apply also to what we might describe as performances in virtual environments: both build on the shared human condition, i.e. on our knowledge about being a human. Consider for example the performance *Border Control*⁴ by Second Front, the self-described⁵ first performance art group in the online virtual world Second Life. The *Border Control* performance featured helicopters and firebombs inside the ‘virtual’ art gallery, and in the end the audience’s avatars were kicked out from the virtual gallery. The Second Front group has an impressive catalogue of documented past performances, which suggests that their mode of working appears to involve building custom environments and avatar skins in *Second Life*, staging the performances in these spaces inside *Second Life*, and inviting audience to observe the performances by bringing their avatars into the same virtual space. Undoubtedly, staging and performing the performances took considerable amount of time and effort from the artists, and required skill in 3D modeling, network technology, etc. Those audiencing the performance are probably aware of what it takes to perform *Border Control* in *Second Life*: they are humans, and as Second Life users know the difficulties involved in using technology. As there is no death in *Second Life*, the “moment the audience fears most and which it yet feverishly awaits” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 14) is probably the event of a computer crash or a network congestion, whose significance can be perfectly well exhausted through a description relying on humans taking on projects constrained only by human condition.

Here we begin to see the differences between *Second Life* performances and computer game performances. In case of gameplay events observed by audiences, the knowledge about being

⁴ For documentation, see http://www.secondfront.org/Performances/Border_Patrol.html

⁵ <http://www.secondfront.org/About/index.html>

human, even if complemented with the knowledge of what it takes to use technologies, is not alone sufficient to provide a baseline for relating to, understanding, and appreciating gameplay performances. Unlike computer games, *Second Life* is a ‘transparent’ platform: the way in which it mediates (Ihde 1990) the experience of its human users is not contingent on *how* the users perform: it does not resist the user’s choices in any way different from how a word processor software does. It does not contain a gameplay condition (Leino 2009), and is not an “automatic skill-tester” (Woods 2007) or a machine evaluating its users effort (Karhulahti 2013). The presence of the gameplay condition in computer games, could perhaps be described as enabling a new “modality” of performance, distinctively different from that of previous technology-enabled performances.

Mundane vehicle simulator as a test case for gameplay performance

To ‘isolate’ the effects of the existential condition characterizing computer games to the ways in which we can observe them being played as ‘performances’, the example of being stuck in a traffic jam, is taken from *ETS2MP*, belonging to the genre of “mundane vehicle simulators”. Mundane vehicle simulators lack the "excitement-filled, exhilarating scenarios" found in mainstream titles (Ram 2014). They are largely devoid of pre-scripted narratives, which in mainstream games lend significance to choices and actions. Characteristic to the genre are also the relative triviality of both intellectual or kinaesthetic (Karhulahti 2013) challenges, the slow pacing of events. Any ‘juiciness, i.e. excessive positive audiovisual feedback for player actions (Juul 2009, 49-50; Juul & Begy 2016) is absent from the genre. Nothing special is at stake in mundane vehicle simulators, except the continuation of the activity itself, whatever it may entail (e.g. making deliveries, customizing one’s truck, goofing around). Thus, it seems that games in this genre allow focusing the analysis on the ways in which the gameplay performance is shaped by the gameplay condition.

ETS2 is about driving a truck to complete deliveries to and from various destinations in Europe. While the map is quite accurate, distance and time are compressed. *ETS2* is characterized by actions such as coupling and uncoupling trailers, lowering and raising axles, accelerating and braking, customizing the truck-avatars, using turn signals and merging onto freeways. By completing deliveries, the player acquires in-game currency, allowing purchasing and upgrading trucks and garages, and, experience points, allowing unlocking new skills and truck components. Multiplayer mode in *ETS2* is made possible by a namesake mod by a hobbyist community known as *TruckersMP*, whose most popular server is usually full with 3500 players. *ETS2MP* players run ‘virtual trucking companies’, organize convoys, and keep an official book of world records. Compared to the single-player mode, *ETS2MP* has less restrictions, and its time runs slower. Most importantly, the roads are devoid of AI-controlled traffic. The highways in *ETS2MP* are largely a solitary affair and encounters with other players are scarce and fleeting: e.g. an exchange of honks to acknowledge each other’s presence while passing or a kind flash of high beams to indicate an intention to overtake. The lonely highways stand in contrast to cities and ports, where traffic jams of tens of trucks are common. Thus, an *ETS2MP* player seeking the company of others might deliberately head to Rotterdam just to participate in and witness the event of chaos at Europoort, perhaps also to show off their unique truck configuration.

However, traffic jams are dangerous: crashing costs money in the form of repairs or compensation for damaged cargo, and without money, player’s trucking company will go

bankrupt, leading to ‘game over’. Thus, we may note that *ETS2MP* requires successfully negotiating the agency of the game artifact (Giddings & Kennedy 2008), characterised by a Gadamerian (2001, 106) “risk”. *ETS2MP* resists the project of playing and by doing so makes the player responsible for the freedom they enjoy. Thus, despite lacking the elements commonly considered as characterizing computer games (score, competition, juiciness, etc), like most mundane vehicle simulators, also *ETS2MP* does indeed contain a “gameplay condition” (Leino 2009), which gives meaning to the rules according to which the players and audience members can observe the game operating (Leino 2016). For example: the rule of taking corners with relatively low speed is meaningful, as toppling one’s truck requires it to be towed to the repair shop, which costs money, without which the player will go bankrupt, which will lead to a ‘game over’. To continue being truck drivers, players need to stay afloat by making enough deliveries and avoiding damage (and by behaving in a ‘civilized’ manner to avoid being banned from the server.)

Thus, *ETS2MP* is not a “virtual world” devoid of emotion and meaning (Dreyfus 2009), a “not-game” (Samyn 2010), a vehicular version of a “walking simulator” (Bozdog & Galloway 2016), or a potentially unethical “non-playable art game” (Leino 2013). Instead, it affords a peculiar, if a ‘minimal’ form of computer game action: while merging onto a highway, flashing the high beams, or getting stuck in a traffic jam involve very little of the qualities associated with computer games they are nevertheless in-game actions (i.e. they unfold against a gameplay condition hardcoded in the materiality of the game artifact). While mundane vehicle simulators like *ETS2MP* do not justify or amplify the actions in themselves with narrative significance, virtuosity, excitement, or spectacle, due to containing a gameplay condition they are not merely neutral stages for just another “virtual” or “digital performance” (Causey 2003; Dixon 2007; Owen 2017), and thus offer an interesting ‘test case’ as they allow ‘isolating’ the existential condition underlying a gameplay performance.

Gameplay performance and ‘x-morphism’

In contrast to the human performer in a performance with corporeal presence in a shared space with audience, or, avatar-based presence in a shared virtual space, where the only resistance is that of this world, computer games introduce another layer of resistance which must be taken into account when audiencing a gameplay performance. In a gameplay performance, the performer is encountering resistance of both the world, and the game in question, and whatever they do, borrows its significance from both human condition, and, the gameplay condition. What appears to be trivial in light of a human condition – say, a truck toppling in *ETS2MP* – may be of great significance within the computer game. To appreciate a gameplay performance, we need to be aware of not only the condition of human beings in the world, but also of the condition of ‘being-in-the-world’ of the computer game in question, i.e. its gameplay condition. Lum et al. (2014, 1424) describe “technomorphism” as the “attribution of technological characteristics to humans.” They cite the following quote from an engineer in the Mars Rover project: “I have frequently tried to put myself in the Rover’s head and say, ‘what do I know about the world...?’” (Vertesi, 2008, cited in Lum et al. 2014, 1424). Asking a similar question is a precondition for audiencing a gameplay performance.

To feel empathy toward the playing other, the performer in a gameplay performance whether perceived in the pair of squares as in the case of *Marriage* (Humble, 2007) or in the photorealistic representation of the human body in an open-world shooter game *DayZ*

(Bohemia Interactive, 2015), in a truck caught in a jumble in *ETS2MP*, or in ‘invisible hand’ moving the blocks in *Tetris (X)*, we must be able to project ourselves onto the playing other whose material correlate is not only the flesh-and-blood human in this world, but also something within the game, i.e. to be able to imagine what it would feel like being subjected to their condition ourselves.

We know of this condition not only that the player-performer is responsible for the freedom they enjoy in the game, i.e. subject to gameplay condition, but also that the phenomenon they are involved in, gameplay, is an ontological hybrid: it encompasses experiential, processual and material qualities (Leino 2012). The hybridity does not signify a mere simultaneous occurrence of these qualities as separate ‘elements’, but rather an inextricable intertwinement across ontological domains, very much like Merleau-Ponty’s account of mind, body, and world. The event of being caught in a traffic jam in *ETS2MP* relies as much on human beings and their projects as it does on the game technology in which is hardcoded the condition against which the humans’ projects can unfold. Furthermore, we know that the entanglement of human and technology is further complicated by the fact that the computer game is simultaneously that which is seen, and that which permits seeing itself through itself (Leino 2016): the player-performer, co-constituted by human and technology, can be described as having technologically enabled sensory modalities that ‘plain’ humans do not have, while these modalities are directed at objects and events inside the game world (Leino 2010, 174-7). (*ETS2MP* player can, for example, observe the game world from a number of different perspectives, whereas we as humans are tied to our embodiment as the indexical zero-point for immediate perceptual experience.) Thus, the empathy toward the human player-performer is characterized by perceiving the other player not only as a flesh-and-blood corporeal human, but as a hybrid being co-constituted by both human and technology to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between its constituent elements (Leino 2010, Vella 2015).

At this point we can note that we need to acknowledge that an attitude of “technomorphism” (Vertesi 2008, Lum et al. 2014) is among the conditions of possibility for relating to a gameplay performance. To understand, relate to, and appreciate a gameplay performance, we must not only anthropomorphise what we can perceive of the player-performer who visible to us either through their representation in the game (as in avatar-based 3rd-person perspective games), through the consequences of their actions (as in games with “god’s eye” -view), or, as the indexical zero-point for the simulated locomotion in the game (as in games with first-person view) – i.e. to acknowledge that their in-game actions are ultimately constrained by their embodied existence as human beings – but, also empathetically technomorphise ourselves, i.e. to imagine what would it be like to be the hybrid human-technology being that is the player-performer. In short: to appreciate the actions of the player-performer in gameplay performance we both technomorphise ourselves as audience, and anthropomorphise what we experience as the player-performer.

Latour (1996, 226-7) [see also Laurier & Philo (1998)], talking about the different ways in which we attribute agency and perceive humans and non-humans, notes that “it is better to speak of (x)-morphism instead of becoming indignant when humans are treated as nonhumans or vice versa.” This term could perhaps be borrowed to characterize the conditions of possibility for the peculiar ‘modality’ of gameplay performance to emerge: the simultaneous anthropomorphisation of the player-performer, and the technomorphisation of

ourselves. Without this (x)-morphism, the audience's empathy cannot exhaust the full potential of the gameplay performance, and observing a gameplay performance falls back on observing what is merely a performance in a virtual environment (Causey 2003; Dixon 2007; Owen 2017), or, being analysed as a mere sign-object (cf. Fischer-Lichte). To further illustrate this requirement for (x)-morphism let us look at examples of another types of human-technology performance.

'Morphisms' in certain other technologically enabled performances

Actuator (2008)⁶ is an on-stage dance performance choreographed and programmed by Thomas Freundlich. The performance, premiered at the Z-in-Motion 2008 festival in Helsinki, Finland, features a human dancer and an ABB IRB 1600 industrial robot moving in dialogue. The choreography of *Actuator* includes a solo by ABB IRB 1600, in which the moves in what might be described as surprisingly 'graceful' way, inviting us to appreciate the human-programmed movements of its mechanical 'arm' as delicate, smooth, and flowing – in a word, human-like. It would not have to be so – programming an industrial robot to perform graceful movement is supposedly more difficult than programming it to perform choppy movement – but the choreographer-programmer has deliberately made ABB IRB 1600 human-like, inviting us to frame the robot as a performer, and in doing so anthropomorphizing the technology into a human-like dancer. However, in contrast to *ETS2MP*, the relationship between the audience and the performance in *Actuator* requires no thinking of ourselves, the audience, as ABB IRB 1600 or any other technology. Appreciating *Actuator* by relating to the robot-performer in *Actuator* lacks the requirement to technomorphise ourselves, present in appreciating *ETS2MP* by relating to the human/technology hybrid that is the *ETS2MP* player-performer. ABB IRB 1600's 'performance' in *Actuator* can be appreciated on humans' terms.

ABB IRB 1600's performance in *Actuator* stand in contrast to a situation where an AI agent is 'playing' a computer game, for example a group of 'bots' engaging in a match of *Counter-Strike* (later *CS*) for the audience to observe. Looking at the AI's 'performance', by projecting ourselves onto the gameplay situation, i.e. by technomorphising ourselves, we can appreciate the precision and 'skill' by which the AI makes no superfluous movements and always hits its targets.⁷ Accessing the game engine directly through software, the AI agent can occupy its space within the feedback loop of the game perfectly, as both the imprecisions originating in the human-computer interface and the element of human error are absent. As players, we know that the AI does not face the condition we would, if we played *CS* – the AI accesses the game-as-played in ways inconceivable to us humans. Thus, there is no grounds for empathy. However, depending on the settings chosen, the AI may show mistakes, imprecisions, and other traits characteristic to human players. It is, however, important to note that as players we know that these are an add-on, afterthought, an emulation, created only for the bots to appear familiar and pleasing to the human observer, very much like the graceful movement of ABB IRB 1600 in *Actuator*.

The installation *Object B* by the Japanese group Exonemo, shown e.g. in Dutch Electronic Art Festival 2007 in Rotterdam, consists of a modified computer game projected on a four sides of a large cube in a gallery space, keyboards, mouses, and a number of household

⁶ For video documentation of the performance, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyuh-Qlgw-Y>

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power tools such as kitchen mixers and handheld drills. The installation creates a feedback loop, in which events in the game world trigger the household powertools attached to keyboards and mouses, which in turn give input to the game engine and thus launch further events. The precision that characterizes AI's playing of *CS* is absent from *Object B*: instead, there is a very human-like feeling of imperfection. Likewise as in the example of *Counter-Strike*, the AI is situated somewhere within the feedback loop, but in contrast to the *Counter-Strike* example, it accesses the game through the same kind of interface that human players would need to use, should they want to participate in the event. Thus, the 'imperfections' and the 'human' character introduced by them into the performance are not an afterthought or emulation as in the case of imperfect AI bots in *CS* or ABB RBB 1600's movements in *Actuator*. In *Object B*, the game is playing itself for the audience to watch, but in contrast to AI bots playing *Counter-Strike*, it does so from a position with which human players can readily empathize. The way how the game-as-played is constituted in *Object B* shares a number of qualities with the games we may play as humans. While there is no performer as such, and conceptualizing the work as a performance would thus be somewhat misguided, *Object B* nevertheless invites us to appreciate itself by introducing shades of anthropomorphisation in our experience: it could be our hands, instead of the power tools, pressing the buttons on the keyboard.

It appears that gameplay performances stand out from among technologically enabled performances in general, by the way in which they require audience to engage in (x)-morphism, rather than in anthropo- or technomorphism alone.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that Fischer-Lichte's notion of bodily co-presence as the pre-condition for a performance has an existential dimension: it assumes not only that bodies are in the same room, but also that the bodies are alike. The shared human condition enables empathy, which in turn allows the audience relate to events in the performance (i.e. to what happens to the performers). I observed how 'performances in virtual reality', in particular those in *Second Life*, still build on the human condition, and suggested that gameplay performances introduce a new 'modality' of performance, which is not accounted for by the requirement for bodily co-presence alone, and which has remained undertheorised in the discourse on "virtual" or "digital performance" (Causey 2003; Dixon 2007; Owen 2017). To understand, relate to, and appreciate a gameplay performance, we must be able to feel empathy toward the performers, not unlike in traditional, 'corporeal' performances. However, actions of the player-performers unfold against not only their human condition, but also against the gameplay condition in the game, hardcoded in the technological materiality of the game artefact.

Thus, human condition alone is not a sufficient basis for empathy toward gameplay performer: their freedoms and responsibilities differ significantly from those of 'plain' humans. The player-performer exercises their freedom and encounters the resistance of the game as a hybrid being, co-constituted by human player and technological artefact which is the game. To feel empathy toward the player-performer, we must imagine ourselves not only being responsible for what the player-performer is responsible, but also being similarly co-constituted by technology: e.g. not only seeing and doing *what* the player-performer sees and does, but also *how* is it possible for them to see and do it. This empathy is possible if we, as

audience, are aware of the technological-material underpinnings of the computer game artefact.

It is worth noting that using ETS2MP as the example allowed me to not pay attention to things such as gameness, narrative significance, audiovisual amplification or ‘juiciness’, and provided a clean environment in which to observe the effects the existential condition characteristic to computer games has to gameplay performances. While this condition appears to be shared by all computer games, a full account of relating to a gameplay performance should pay attention also to those aspects which choosing this example allowed to be bracketed out.

Going back to the example of the unfortunate driver being caught in the middle of the jumble of semi-trucks in the parking lot mentioned in the beginning. Like Fischer-Lichte suggested and in line with some of the Reddit commentators, we could read the situation of people playing a computer game just to get stuck in a traffic jam in a somewhat metaphorical fashion, as depicting for example the absurdity and pointlessness of post-modern, neoliberal, etc. life. We could also look at the objects in the scene, e.g. the trucks, as ‘props’ in a performance vested with significance, semiotic or otherwise. However, to appreciate the event as a *performance* as Fischer-Lichte meant it, we need to consider it as presentation rather than representation, and focus on experiencing it, rather than interpreting it. To be able to do this, we need to build a bridge for the empathy to cross from the human observer to the technologically co-constituted player-performer: to leverage what we know about what is it like for the poor driver in the middle.

Coming across a disabled no-collisions zone in the harbour is extremely unfortunate: players moving cargo between mainland Europe and the British Isles can make use of two crossing points: the Eurotunnel train station, or the Europort harbour. With 6000 players on a server, the crossing points are almost always crowded. Usually the roads leading to the crossing points are designated as no-collisions zone, meaning that players’ trucks can pass through each other, and, that the player’s computers do not need to perform the demanding task of calculating the collisions of multiple trucks, and the server does not need to keep everything in synchronisation. For the uninitiated, i.e. those without knowledge of the gameplay condition in ETS2 and the ways in which the “playing I” in ETS2 is co-constituted by human and technology, the event was trivial, merely a funny subject for a Youtube video, as no-one “really” got hurt. Perhaps the uninitiated ones did not even realise that there was a human agent at the centre of the events.

However, those who are capable of the previously described (x)-morphism, i.e. those who are able to both “technomorphize” themselves into the condition of an ETS2 player-performer, and anthropomorphise the moving camera (during 1st person view perspective) and the truck (during the 3rd person perspective) in the video into a another human being, are able to feel empathy toward the player-performer, and thus understand and relate to the events depicted. To those capable of (x)-morphism, and thus able to relate to and appreciate the events as a gameplay performance, the chaos at the Europort appears indeed as a kind of moment comparable to a tightrope artist falling, a moment that “the audience fears most and which it yet feverishly awaits” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 14).

Games

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